

“She Would Carry This into the Sea”: Bodies of Water and Aqueous Imaginaries in Ysabelle Cheung’s *Patchwork Dolls*

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Abstract:

This essay reads three stories from Hong Kong-based writer Ysabelle Cheung’s debut speculative fiction collection *Patchwork Dolls* (2026) — “Please, Get Out and Dance,” “Mycomorphosis,” and “To My Great-Granddaughter, Who Will Find This Letter When I Am Dead” — through Astrida Neimanis’s hydrofeminist framework. The essay argues that Cheung’s collection stages water as a relational substance that dissolves the fantasy of the bounded, autonomous body, enables collaborative worlding across species and time, and sustains an ethics of care attentive to human and more-than-human life alike. In “Please, Get Out and Dance,” a group of political resisters found a seafloor community, enacting a hydrocommons that connects bodies across species and deep time. In “Mycomorphosis,” the pervasive dampness of a sealed apartment enables a fungal-aquatic becoming that dissolves the perceived boundary between the human and the nonhuman. In “To My Great-Granddaughter,” water in cooking and ritual circulates as the vital conduit of watery inheritances and responsivity. Together, the three stories cultivate what Neimanis calls “aqueous imaginaries” — ways of imagining embodied life as intimately and inseparably tethered to water and to the more-than-human world.

Keywords: hydrofeminism, hydrocommons, aqueous imaginaries, posthuman gestationality, transcorporeality, watery inheritances, Hong Kong speculative fiction

1. Introduction: Figuring Ourselves as Bodies of Water

In *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017), Astrida Neimanis reconceptualizes water as a relational substance that binds bodies, environments, and temporalities in ways that challenge the ontological assumptions of Western modernity. To figure ourselves as bodies of water, Neimanis argues, “not only rejects a human separation from Nature ‘out there’; it also torques many of our accepted cartographies of space, time, and species, and implicates a specifically watery movement of difference and repetition” (2017, 4). Against the dominant cultural tendency to understand the body as a bounded and autonomous entity, separate from its environment and stable across time, Neimanis’s “posthuman feminist phenomenology” insists on the body’s fundamental porosity: its permeability to water, its constitution by watery flows that exceed the boundaries of the skin, and its

embeddedness within planetary systems of circulation that connect the individual to the geological and the nonhuman (2017, 6). Water, in this framework, is not merely a substance the body contains or consumes but the medium through which the body is constituted and reconstituted in relation to others, both human and more-than-human.

This hydrofeminist perspective intersects productively with the broader field of the blue humanities, an emerging interdisciplinary formation that critically examines the ocean's role in shaping cultural imaginaries, political geographies, and ecological relations. Within blue ecocriticism, water is understood not as inert backdrop — "a stage for human history; a narrative of flat surfaces" — but as "a cultural or multispecies ecology" that encodes legacies of colonialism, migration, extractivism, and ecological transformation (DeLoughrey 2017, 33). The oceanic turn repositions water as a central actor in shaping the conditions of human and nonhuman life, attending to what has been called "an aquatic anthropology of the science/art/culture nexus" that refuses to separate the material from the cultural, the ecological from the political (Helmreich and Jones 2018, 100).

Hong Kong-based writer Ysabelle Cheung's debut short story collection *Patchwork Dolls* (2026) is a work in which water appears not as backdrop but as a structuring force that dissolves the boundaries between body and environment, human and nonhuman, the present and the past. Three stories in particular — "Please, Get Out and Dance," "Mycomorphosis," and "To My Great-Granddaughter, Who Will Find This Letter When I Am Dead" — engage most productively with Neimanis's hydrofeminist framework. This essay argues that Cheung's collection stages water as a relational substance that dissolves the fantasy of the bounded, autonomous body, enables collaborative worlding across species and time, and sustains an ethics of care attentive to human and more-than-human life alike.

2. "Our People Came from the Sea": Aquatic Origins and Kinship in "Please, Get Out and Dance"

"Please, Get Out and Dance" is set in a city under authoritarian surveillance, where buildings are vanishing by bureaucratic decree and attendance at a mandatory annual parade is enforced by law. Frankie, the protagonist, joins a small group of resisters who have chosen to build a new community on the seafloor. The story is structured around the double movement this premise generates: the compulsory, terrestrial choreography of the state-mandated parade, and the voluntary, aquatic departure that Frankie and the other resisters undertake toward the sea. These two movements — the forced choreography on land and the chosen immersion in water — constitute the story's central political opposition, and reading this opposition through Neimanis's hydrofeminist framework reveals the deeper ontological dimensions of the story's aquatic imagery.

The bodies of the parade are synchronized and interchangeable, their individuality dissolved into the spectacle of collective compliance. "Their feet flowed the same circular lines, their cheeks swollen as if bitten by mosquitoes, thousands of them stepping and hopping and arching their limbs on the enormous flat screen" (Cheung 2026, 25). The flat screen completes the logic of the mass: the

dancing bodies watch themselves dance, each one a reflection of every other. This dissolution of individuality produces not connection but erasure. “Somewhere in the crowd, a woman with a poster in her hands screamed and screamed, but nobody could hear what she was saying — the orchestra of sound was so loud — and then she was gone. How or where she went nobody knew, although the entire event was filmed live and played back to the dancing masses” (Cheung 2026, 25). The live broadcast records everything and registers nothing: the woman’s scream goes unheard, her disappearance unnoticed by the mass that continues to dance in her absence. The dancing crowd’s fluidity is state-enforced and deadening: a dissolution that flattens difference and makes bodies interchangeable rather than relational; the aberrant body — the woman who screams — is rendered taboo within the choreographed sameness of the mass.

Against this deadening fluidity, the story posits another: the generative, porous community of the sea that rejects “a binary logic of either/or,” stressing instead “that as bodies of water we are *both* different *and* in common” (Neimanis 2017, 4). A young urban planning student has identified “a dry pocket of air, a bump on the seafloor” (Cheung 2026, 20) as its site: a community for those who can neither stay on land nor emigrate to foreign destinations such as America or England. His vision is explicitly cosmological and ancestral: “After all,” he tells his audience, “our people came from the sea” (Cheung 2026, 20). He shows slides of “half-fish, half-human creatures depicted in cave drawings and ancient cloth patterns,” and argues that “there were still fish-children living in the water, and on quiet days you could hear their voices reeding through the waves, calling to their landlocked relatives” (Cheung 2026, 20–21). He tells them: “The pearls you wear on your necks are their tears. The food you eat is their harvest. Their hair is what you boil into soups” (Cheung 2026, 21). Here, the human body is revealed not as the terminus of evolution but as a way station in a longer and more fluid history of aquatic becoming. As bodies of water, Neimanis reminds us, “we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation” — our “wet matters are in constant process of intake, transformation, and exchange” (2017, 2). The student’s origin myth enacts exactly this wet porosity: it places the present community within a deep-time narrative of species permeability, in which the human and the fish-child are not separate categories but variations on a shared aquatic ancestry. Water’s deep time becomes tangible as the tears worn as pearls, the harvest eaten as food, the hair boiled into soups; these are images of a circulation of substance between the human and the more-than-human, the living and the dead, the body and the sea: a dissolution of boundaries oriented not toward enforced sameness but toward generative, species-crossing, intergenerational kinship.

The student’s rendering of the seafloor community on drafting paper — “a constellation of water, a sky under mountain” (Cheung 2026, 21) — is itself a hydrofeminist cartography, one that torques the accepted geography of above and below, land and sea. In the world of the story, the land has become the site of compulsion and erasure: the parade, the surveillance apparatus, the systematic disappearance of buildings, objects, and people. The sea is figured as the site of a different kind of dissolution: not the enforced sameness of the parade but a porosity that connects across species,

generations, and deep time. Neimanis reminds us that "planetary waters have persisted — nothing added, nothing lost — for several billion years," holding "a past as remote as that gaseous primordial soup, as well as a future, unforeseeable" (2017, 52). It is precisely this deep-time continuity that the student's origin myth invokes. To go into the sea is to return to a more-than-human mode of being — one in which the boundaries between the living and the dead, the human and the fish-child, the individual body and the ancestral community, are held in productive exchange.

The story's ending gives this hydrofeminist framework its most emotionally charged expression. As Frankie prepares to descend into the sea on the inflatable slide, she hears something in the tunnel through which the resisters have passed:

[S]he became aware of another voice in the tunnel, small and wet. It seemed to come from the walls, and she moved closer, the sound becoming tin-bright. It was a song, and it was wordless, pulling into her body, filling her with a new longing. In it, she recognized sounds that had always followed her: in the water rushing into their old apartment as she played with toys [...] in rainstorms that always came down unevenly onto the pavements, ribboned with wind; and in the water in her own body, the fluid that linked her skin to flesh, to bone. It called to her with a voice that was both her own and the history of all that had come before her. (Cheung 2026, 26–27)

This passage enacts what Neimanis calls "a more-than-human hydrocommons" (2017, 2) with extraordinary lyrical precision. The "voice in the tunnel" is at once many things: the sound of water in the apartment walls, the sound of rain on pavements, the sound of the water in Frankie's own body, "the fluid that linked her skin to flesh, to bone" (Cheung 2026, 26–27). Water here is not a substance external to the body but the body's own connective tissue — the medium through which Frankie's skin is linked to her flesh, her flesh to her bone, her individual body to "the history of all that had come before her" (Cheung 2026, 27). To hear this voice is to recognize the deep-time continuity of the body's aquatic constitution: the recognition that Frankie's body has always been a body of water, always connected to the rain, the apartment walls, the tunnel, the sea toward which she is moving.

At the story's close, Frankie's mother and grandmother slide into the sea together, and "[t]he fish-children sang deep underwater as the surface of the sea met the eye of the sun" (Cheung 2026, 30). Then it is Frankie's turn:

She took off her shoes and laid them neatly on the ground next to the slide, as if to say, *I'll be back for you later*. The sky was knife-bright, the grass soft and loose, the dirt underneath still wet from rain. She dug her fingers in — it was cool, so alive — and took two fistfuls of soil and grass. She would carry this into the sea; build a new mountain there. (Cheung 2026, 30)

Frankie enters the sea carrying the terrestrial with her: the soil and grass in her fists, the rain still wet in the earth, the mountain she will build beneath the waves. Neimanis writes that "[f]or us

humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves” (2017, 2), and elaborates this connection through a chain of mutual implication that resonates directly with the story’s closing image:

We are literally implicated in other animal, vegetable, and planetary bodies that materially course through us, replenish us, and draw upon our own bodies as their wells: human bodies ingest reservoir bodies, while reservoir bodies are slaked by rain bodies, rain bodies absorb ocean bodies, ocean bodies aspirate fish bodies, fish bodies are consumed by whale bodies — which then sink to the seafloor to rot and be swallowed up again by the ocean’s dark belly. This is a different kind of “hydrological cycle”. (2017, 3)

Frankie’s descent enacts precisely this hydrological cycle. She is not entering an alien element but rejoining a cycle of which her body has always been a part. This is a hydrofeminist gesture: the body’s porosity to both water and earth, its capacity to carry the terrestrial into the aquatic and reconstitute it there. Frankie’s fistfuls of soil carried into the sea literalize a hydrological cycle in which the new community she will build on the seafloor will be made of both the remembered land and the new aquatic medium, both the history that has been lived and the future that is being made.

3. Fungal-Aquatic Becoming and the Porous Body in “Mycomorphosis”

“Mycomorphosis” follows Noel, a Chinese-American woman living in New York City in the aftermath of a racially motivated acid attack, as brain fungi gradually colonize her skull, her ears, and eventually her entire body. The story is primarily a story of fungal transformation, but water is its enabling medium throughout, and together the two substances reveal what Neimanis would recognize as the body’s fundamentally watery nature: its porosity and what Neimanis describes as the body’s gestational capacity — “[w]atery bodies are gestational milieus for another,” inaugurating us into “complex relations of gift, theft, and debt with all other watery life” (2017, 3). These relations, suppressed by the racialized, patriarchal social order that requires Noel to maintain a bounded, compliant form, are precisely what her fungal-aquatic transformation restores, enabling a more entangled and generatively posthuman mode of being.

The story opens with water in its double register: as the substance in which Noel’s wounded body is most exposed, and as the medium in which something else becomes possible. As Neimanis puts it, “[w]ater is at once the originary condition of all possibility, but also its force of differentiation and wellspring of unknowability” (2017, 69). In the beginning of the story, Noel returns to her apartment and draws a bath “to calm her nerves” (Cheung 2026, 1). The bath is the story’s first space of watery intimacy, and its description is notably ambivalent: the water brings both the possibility of dissolution — “she wondered how it would feel to sink; to dissolve into the water, to yield” (Cheung 2026, 3) — and the revelation of the self’s new topography. In the mirror near the bathtub, Noel tracks “the heated silvers of water knives on her skin,” the scar that maps her cheek, the “new topography” she has not yet been able to reconcile (Cheung 2026, 2). This is the body as Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes it: “always something other than what it is,” “never hermetically sealed”

(1962, 198) — that is, open and permeable, constantly transforming. Water here exposes the body's vulnerability even as it serves as a condition of "possibility, a latency" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 133): the nightmares about the acid attack that have plagued Noel are beginning to subside, "slunk into [...] silkier" shapes, now "led by a single image or feeling — a handful of moss, white roots in water, a sheet of sunlight" (Cheung 2026, 2) — the first intimation of the fungal-aquatic becoming that will follow. The bathtub is not a sealed container but what Merleau-Ponty calls "the flesh of the world" (1968, 149) — a mesh in which body and water "overlap[]" and "encroach[]" upon each other, such that "things pass into us, as well as we into the things" (1968, 123): the water enters Noel's pores, the scar becomes newly visible in the steam, the dreams of moss and watery roots begin to take shape at the threshold of the liquid and the skin.

The imagery of "white roots in water" (Cheung 2026, 2) is the story's first intimation of the fungal-aquatic becoming that will drive the narrative. Roots in water is a hydroponic image: the organism sustained by water alone, the boundary between the plant and its medium dissolved by submersion. Noel does not yet know that this image prefigures her own transformation, but the dream invites precisely the kind of questioning that Neimanis identifies as central to hydrofeminist thinking: "If our bodies are mostly water, where does this water come from? Where does it go, and what does it make possible?" (2017, 41). To ask these questions, Neimanis argues, requires divesting from the idea of the body "as only human, as contained within our skin, as beginning and ending in the 'I'" (2017, 41) — precisely the bounded, autonomous body that the dominant social order requires Noel to inhabit. The dream of white roots in water suspends this dominant Western metaphysical inheritance: it places Noel within a "hydrocommons of wet relations" (Neimanis 2017, 4), what Neimanis describes as "a commons and a facilitation of life-in-the-plural, and life becoming different" (2017, 204) — a watery embodiment nourished by immersion rather than by the solid ground of social legibility, in which the body's boundaries are not fixed but perpetually dissolved and reconstituted by the water that flows through them.

The story's instruction for fungal cultivation is characteristically terse: "Shade. Silence. Water" (Cheung 2026, 12). These three words, listed without elaboration, identify water as one of the three essential conditions for the mushroom spawn that Noel has discovered in her bathroom. For Neimanis, the body's immersion in the watery environment carries what she calls an "*onto-logic*": "an important philosophical proposition [...] that helps us rethink dominant Western ontologies that privilege a static and separated way of bodily being" (2017, 96). The story's pervasive dampness enacts exactly this onto-logic: the weather has "been so damp lately that she felt exhausted just from walking down the street" (Cheung 2026, 11); the door is "seamed shut with spines of fungus, which had sprouted from the damp, split wood" (Cheung 2026, 13); when Noel naps in the bathtub, she "would sense a dampness around her, although she hadn't used any water. It felt like a mossy blanket, a protection" (Cheung 2026, 14). Drawing on Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, Neimanis describes this as the fundamental inseparability of the human body from its environment: "the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (Alaimo 2010, 2, qtd. in

Neimanis 2017, 77) — an “imbrication” of human embodiment “with elemental and environmental matters in relations of contiguity and belonging, rather than hierarchy” (Neimanis 2017, 77). The fungi enact exactly this relational ontology: when Noel laughs, “she felt herself vibrate. The fungus in her ears shook too” (Cheung 2026, 14); the mushrooms “liked” the dampness, “[t]hey kept growing” (Cheung 2026, 14); Noel’s eyes become “moist and lined with mycelium” (Cheung 2026, 15). The water in her body and the damp fungal environment are no longer separate but continuous, each sustaining the other in what Neimanis calls “an intricate and intimate entanglement of relationality” (2017, 99) — a “more-than-human hydrocommons” (2017, 2) in which Noel, the fungi, and the water are participants in the same wet commons.

A small but resonant detail extends this hydrofeminist reading further: in the middle of the night, Noel “always heard the water through the walls” when the immigrant family next door “flushed the toilet” (Cheung 2026, 13). This quotidian hydrology — the shared water infrastructure of the apartment building, audible through the walls at night — connects Noel to the community around her without requiring their acknowledgment or her own. The water flows through the building’s pipes indifferently, carrying within it the domestic life of all its inhabitants. Noel hears it in the dark, connected to her neighbors through the building’s aquatic circulatory system even as she steadily retreats from the social world. This is Neimanis’s “flow and flush of waters” (2017, 66) at its most intimate and most ordinary: the biological and meteorological cycles of water that “intercorporeally sustain our bodies” (2017, 66) made audible through the walls of a New York apartment building, connecting Noel to her neighbors through the shared infrastructure of the building’s plumbing as surely as rain connects body to reservoir, reservoir to ocean.

The closing scene returns to the bathtub — the story’s primary aquatic space — and stages Noel’s final dissolution into the fungal-aquatic community:

In the bathroom, a colorless land waited for her. The pellucid mushrooms leaned, they curved to her flesh, the scars on her face, like a million tiny hands reaching from the rim of the bathtub. Lowering herself in, she waited for the spores to merge with every cell in her body. (Cheung 2026, 15)

The bathtub here is explicitly described as “a colorless land” (Cheung 2026, 15) — a terrain, a space of dwelling as much as a vessel of water. The pellucid mushrooms that lean toward Noel’s flesh, curving to the contours of her scar, are not attacking her but reaching toward her with something that the story figures as care: “like a million tiny hands reaching from the rim of the bathtub” (Cheung 2026, 15). This is Neimanis’s watery intimacy made literal — as she puts it, “*Intimacy is not mastery*” (2017, 112). The spores that will merge with every cell in Noel’s body figure the ultimate dissolution of the boundary between her human body and the fungal-aquatic community she has been cultivating. This dissolution is not death — the story refuses to frame it as such — but what Neimanis calls “a specifically watery movement” (2017, 4): a movement beyond the bounded human body toward a more porous, entangled, and multiply constituted mode of being.

4. Hydrofeminist Transmission and Watery Inheritances in "To My Great-Granddaughter"

"To My Great-Granddaughter, Who Will Find This Letter When I Am Dead" takes the form of a letter written by an unnamed great-grandmother to a great-granddaughter she will never meet, transmitting across generations a set of survival practices — recipes, growing techniques, rituals of departure — accumulated across a lifetime of wars, displacement, and loss. In this story, water is figured as a substance of care, knowledge, and transmission — the "vital conduit" (Neimanis 2017, 86) through which these practices are passed forward. Reading this story through Neimanis's hydrofeminist framework reveals how deeply water is implicated in the story's central concerns: the body's embeddedness in ecological systems, the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and care across conditions of displacement, and the watery inheritances that sustain us as bodies of water.

Water appears in the story's opening instructions before any other substance: "If there is an estuary or stream nearby, make sure to fasten stilts to your home" (Cheung 2026, 31). The great-grandmother's first advice to her great-granddaughter is about the body's relation to flowing water: not the control or management of water but the architectural adjustment of the home to accommodate its presence and flow. Neimanis reminds us that water "infiltrates and inhabits the vapour we breathe, the land we work, the animal, vegetable, meteorological and other earth others with whom we share this planet" (2017, 65) — it is, she insists, "not simply something 'out there' — environment, resource, commodity, backdrop — but also the stuff of human bodies, and never separate from our own incontestable materiality" (2017, 21). The great-grandmother's opening instruction enacts exactly this understanding: the home is not a sealed unit separate from its aquatic environment but a structure that must be built in relation to the water that flows through it, around it, and beneath it. The stilts that fasten the home above the estuary are a material expression of what Neimanis calls the body's "hydrophilic" nature (2017, 65) — the acknowledgment that the boundary between the domestic space and the watery world is permeable and negotiated rather than fixed and absolute.

Water is the central element of the letter's first recipe, the double-boiled roots soup that the great-grandmother made during the revolution. The recipe is built around a specific relationship between two bodies of water — the large pot and the smaller pot — that mirrors Neimanis's hydrofeminist model of gestationality:

Set up a large pot or cauldron with water and place a smaller pot — empty — inside of it. The smaller pot is where the soup will be made. Start boiling the water in the large pot [...] add the roots, Raix, a slice of ginger, and forty cups of water with a dash of salt to the smaller pot. Cover and leave for twelve hours, uninterrupted. (Cheung 2026, 35)

The double-boiling method is emblematic of hydrofeminist care: water heating water, the outer body of water sustaining the inner body of water, the larger system enabling the smaller system's transformation. The recipe's insistence on exactitude — "forty cups of water," "twelve hours, uninterrupted" (Cheung 2026, 35) — is not merely culinary precision but an ethic of attentiveness to

water's transformative work: the water must be given the precise time and volume it requires to dissolve the ingredients into the broth's fluid continuity. What emerges is "a silky, balanced broth that stays hot even in the coldest of nights" (Cheung 2026, 34); in consuming the broth, one body of water passes its warmth into another, enacting what Neimanis calls "watery transit" — water as "productive of difference" (2017, 82), engendering warmth and nourishment for the bodies that receive it. The great-grandmother's soup kitchen enacts what Neimanis calls "the passage from body of water to body of water (always *as* body of water)" — "never synecdochal or metaphoric; it is radically material" (2017, 86). The great-grandmother makes the soup explicitly "to feed and nourish a large number of guests," many of them "young people who [...] had no family or had been turned away by their own houses" (Cheung 2026, 33): bodies rendered vulnerable by revolution and displacement, for whom the soup kitchen becomes the valued site of "complex and shared cyclings — body, to body, to body" (Neimanis 2017, 86).

The story's most striking hydrofeminist figure is the fish skin cape that the great-grandmother makes for her daughter's wedding, worn on the night of the family's departure: "she served us in a cape I made out of fish skin. It shimmered like a pond in the moon, and I felt that it was too beautiful, too physical" (Cheung 2026, 42). The fish skin cape is a "porous and palimpsestic" body in Neimanis's sense (2017, 29): it carries within its shimmer the traces of nonhuman aquatic life, of the water from which the fish came, and of the human labor that transformed it into a garment. To don this cape is not merely to wear the sea on one's body but to participate in what Neimanis calls "a collective worlding" — the differentiation and entanglement of bodies that is never only individual but always relational, always indebted to "what, and whom" one's body has been made possible by (2017, 29). That the cape is worn on the night of imminent departure — of a ceasefire being broken, of soldiers coming, of oncoming devastation — gives it a quality of hydrofeminist defiance: at the threshold of violence and displacement, the body asserts its continuity with the nonhuman, its constitution by waters and lives that exceed the human order's capacity to contain or destroy them.

Water also marks the story's most sorrowful moment: the boy soldier from the great-grandmother's village who drowned himself in the lake — "A suicide, they had said, and all during the pregnancy, I couldn't stop thinking about him. I wondered what world I was bringing my daughter into, how we were being so much less of ourselves — so reduced in our want for the future, the tiny holes that perforated through the dark" (Cheung 2026, 42). The boy's death by water haunts the great-grandmother's pregnancy as a figure of what political violence does to the body. Yet the great-grandmother is herself, at this very moment, a gestational body of water: the amniotic waters of her pregnancy sustaining the daughter who will be born into this perforated darkness, her own wet materiality enfolding, in Neimanis's terms, "a watery offering to unknowable futures" (2017, 102). The juxtaposition is the letter's most quietly devastating hydrofeminist image: a death by drowning, a body gestating new life. Neimanis reminds us that "water will still exceed us — our sovereign subject bodies, and our capacity to fully know" (2017, 146), and water here exceeds any simple accounting: the lake that took the boy soldier is the same water that will sustain the daughter,

and the granddaughter, and the great-granddaughter to whom this letter is addressed, holding "the *was, is, and yet-to-come* together in its materiality" (2017, 88).

The letter's closing instructions for the "Harvest for the Eve of a Departure" constitute a meditation on watery inheritances:

Gather all your harvest; dig up all the roots. Go to the forest. Wash the harvest in spring water. Dry leaves in the midday sun. Start a fire in a small but deep pit [...] add in the harvest, some boughs of willow, lavender, thyme, wine. Roast with the cover on for a few hours. Sit in the smoke with your loved ones. Cut an inch off your hair and give it back to the earth. Thank the ancestors for giving you this food. Begin the feast when you are ready. Eat until you are done. (Cheung 2026, 43)

The first action of this ritual is washing — "Wash the harvest in spring water" — and the last actions are giving hair back to earth and thanking the ancestors (Cheung 2026, 43). This sequence — water, then fire, then community, then gift, then gratitude — pays tribute to what Neimanis calls our "watery inheritances" (2017, 116): the recognition that our bodies of water are indebted to the planetary waters that have sustained them. Spring water, specifically, is water from the earth itself, having circulated through rock and soil before arriving at the spring; in washing the harvest in this water before roasting and eating it, the ritual closes a circuit consisting of body, soil, and water — that is, in Neimanis's terms, the hydrocommons made tangible: "a hydrocommons that we make, and that makes us in turn" (2017, 169).

5. Hydrofeminism Across Three Literary Registers

Across the three stories, Cheung's collection maps what Neimanis calls the hydrocommons, where the fantasy of the bounded, autonomous humanist subject is dissolved, where bodies world themselves collaboratively with the human and more-than-human, and where water mediates an ethics of care and responsivity to other forms of life. The first cross-cutting concern is water's role in dissolving the fantasy of the bounded, autonomous body that dominant Western ontologies privilege — what Neimanis calls "swamping the solid ground of Western ontological frameworks" (2017, 105). In "Please, Get Out and Dance," the sea offers a collaborative ontology: porous, relational, constituted by its aquatic environment and continuous with the fish-children who sing in the deep. In "Mycomorphosis," the bounded body is the body that racial capitalism requires Noel to maintain: productive, legible, and organized around the demands of the employer, the landlord, and the family. The damp apartment and the water in the bathtub dissolve this body's perceived boundaries, enabling Noel's fungal-aquatic becoming that demonstrates what Neimanis describes as water's capacity to "facilitate[] the becoming of bodies; it literally bathes them into being" (2017, 95). In "To My Great-Granddaughter," water used in cooking, washing, and ritual — "the lineaments of water's gestationality" (Neimanis 2017, 103) — connects the displaced and beleaguered community to "a planetary watery milieu that interpermeates and connects bodies, and bathes new kinds of plural life into being" (Neimanis 2017, 39).

The second cross-cutting concern is water's function as collaborative worlding. "We are the watery world," Neimanis reminds us — "metonymically, temporarily, partially, and particularly. Water irrigates us, sustains us, comprises the bulk of our soupy flesh" (2017, 27). "As watery milieus for other bodies," Neimanis argues, "we are always gathering the debts of the myriad watery bodies that are the condition of our possibility" (2017, 39). In "Please, Get Out and Dance," this gathering of debts is figured through the fish-children's tears worn as pearls, their hair boiled into soups, their voices calling across the waves to their landlocked relatives. In "Mycomorphosis," the water heard through the walls at night, flowing through the apartment building's shared infrastructure, connects Noel to her neighbors across the seemingly impervious apartment walls. In "To My Great-Granddaughter," the collaborative function of water is most explicit: the letter's recipes require water at every stage, and the water used in the soup kitchen and the feast on the eve of departure carries within it the specific histories of care and responsivity that the great-grandmother is transmitting to her great-granddaughter.

The third cross-cutting concern is what might be called the hydrofeminist ethics of care: the recognition that care is constituted through watery relations, that to care for another is to enter into a relationship of aquatic intimacy with them. In "Please, Get Out and Dance," this ethics is performed through the resisters' communal descent into the sea: the volunteers who test the seafloor with "small radars and measuring tapes" (Cheung 2026, 27), the fish-children who sing a welcoming song, Frankie's fistfuls of soil carried into the water to build a new mountain beneath the sea. In "Mycomorphosis," it is performed through Noel's tireless care for the fungi — washing them, providing them with shade and silence and water, attending to their growth — a non-masterful, non-exploitative relation with nonhuman life that the story presents as more genuinely caring than any of the human relationships Noel maintains. In "To My Great-Granddaughter," the ethics of care is the letter itself, transmitting the great-grandmother's watery knowledge to a great-granddaughter she will never meet, trusting that the water will carry it forward, that "there are ways to regenerate" (Cheung 2026, 42).

6. Conclusion: Building a New Mountain in the Sea

A feminist posthumanism, Neimanis argues, inaugurates "connected, indebted, dispersed, relational" ontologies that are "not only about correcting a phallogocentric understanding of bodies, but also about developing imaginaries that might allow us to relate differently" (2017, 11). Cheung's *Patchwork Dolls* enacts exactly this rethinking across three radically different narrative registers: the speculative political allegory of "Please, Get Out and Dance," the intimate posthuman transformation of "Mycomorphosis," and the intergenerational epistolary of "To My Great-Granddaughter." Together, these three stories cultivate what Neimanis calls "aqueous imaginaries — those committed to an understanding of water as intimately, inseparably, tethered to *life*" (2017, 155). Such imaginaries are not abstract but radically material — enacted in soil, spore, and spring water — and they constitute, in Neimanis's terms, "an active process" of renegotiation of what it means to be a body of water in a world that has long insisted on the fantasy of bounded, autonomous, and self-sufficient embodiment (2017, 175).

Frankie carries soil into the sea to build a new mountain there — a gesture of hydrofeminist world-making that refuses to choose between the terrestrial and the aquatic. Noel lowers herself into the bathtub and waits for the spores to merge with every cell in her body — a posthuman becoming in which the human and the nonhuman, the solid and the fluid, become truly indistinguishable. The great-grandmother washes her harvest in spring water before the feast on the eve of departure — an honoring of watery inheritances, transmitted and carried forward into an uncertain future. Neimanis writes that bodies of water — “as lived embodiment, as figuration, as hydrocommons in difference, and as feminist protest — may not be the paddle that will guide us out of this planetary mess. But I am wagering that this figuration might just help us learn to swim” (2017, 26). To read *Patchwork Dolls* through the hydrofeminist lens is not to impose a framework on the stories but to follow the water where it leads — learning, with Cheung’s protagonists, to swim.

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